

4.3 AGRICULTURE

INTRODUCTION

This section analyzes potential impacts on agricultural resources from projected population growth and development in Fresno County to the year 2020. Agricultural impacts include the loss of prime farmland, removal of land from agricultural preserves, and changes in the amount of agricultural output and the County's revenue base.

The analyses of project impacts to agriculture includes determining the amount of land that will potentially be converted from agricultural to urban uses; the types, amount and location of farmland soils that will be removed from production; the types, and the amount, cost and general location of where crops will be lost due to urban land conversion. A discussion of land that may be taken out of agricultural preserves is also included.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

Information on the agricultural resource setting is provided in Chapter 2, Agriculture, of the *Fresno County General Plan Draft Background Report*. Chapter 2 is hereby incorporated by reference and summarized below.

According to the Department of Conservation, Farmland Mapping Program, the County has approximately 374,567 acres of prime farmland, and another 144,243 acres of farmland of Statewide importance, 96,724 acres of unique farmland, and 29,663 acres of farmland of local importance. For purposes of discussion and analysis, the county is differentiated into five geographical regions including: the Coast Range; Westside Valley; Eastside Valley; Sierra foothills; and Sierra Mountains. Most of the high-quality farmland areas are located in the Eastside Valley. Land west of I-5 (the Coast Range foothills area) is generally used for cattle grazing and mineral extraction, although there is also a small amount of irrigated fruit and nut tree crops, row crops, and dry crop farming in that area. The Westside Valley is typically used for row and field crop production, with some fruit and nut tree crops. The Sierra Foothill area supports cattle grazing and citrus production at the lower elevations. Land in the Sierra Nevada area is not typically farmed; however, it is used for cattle grazing. Along the west side of the City of Fresno, Clovis, Sanger, and Reedley, and elsewhere in the Eastside Valley, farms generally grow tree fruits, almonds, and raisin grapes. On the west side of SR 99, farms mostly grow grapes, almonds, apples, and alfalfa. Near the Fresno Slough area of the Eastside Valley, row crops are predominant. Near I-5, as well as on the North and South Valley area, almonds, row crops, field crops, apples, and some grapes are grown.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of the *Background Report*, farming and agricultural related businesses comprise a significant component of the local economy. Combined harvested crop production in the County grossed over \$3.3 billion in 1996. Several factors contribute to the success of agricultural operations in Fresno County, not the least of which are excellent soil and climatic growing conditions. Workforce and transportation availability are also key factors.

County farmers harvested over 2,134,762 acres of crops in 1996. Seventy percent of the harvested acreage was field crops; 17 percent was fruits and nuts; 11 percent vegetable crops, and the remaining was other crops such as seeds and nursery products. Cattle, poultry, industrial crops and apiary products were valued at over \$712,622,300 in the same year. Crop trends indicate the largest areas of agricultural market growth are in lettuce, onions and garlic, tomatoes, almonds, safflower, peaches, and nectarines and other deciduous fruits, and citrus and olives.

The County has over 374,567 acres of prime farmland, and 144,243 acres of farmland of statewide importance. Approximately 308,945 acres of land are used for cattle grazing. Approximately 1,494,454 acres of farmland are within Williamson Act agricultural preserves on 14,450 parcels. Most of the preserves are located in unincorporated areas of the county, as shown in Figure 1-6, Land Conservation Act Contracts, in Chapter 1 in the *Background Report*. Notices of non-renewal have been filed for 7,571.06 acres in Fresno County. The contractual agreements on all of these lands will expire by 2006.

There are approximately 37,737 acres of land within the existing SOIs and community plan areas that are presumed to be urbanized in the future. Land near these areas are primarily in the Eastside Valley area, as shown in Figure 2-1, Important Farmland, the *Background Report*. The majority of land includes prime or important soils, representing about 7.3 percent of the total amount of prime or important soils in the county.

REGULATORY SETTING

The County Agricultural Commissioner's Office employs various regulations and procedures to minimize agricultural impacts on adjacent non-agricultural properties, including the issuance of pesticide application permits, providing agricultural land use recommendations on development projects, and providing a range of educational programs and services. The County also enforces a Right-to-Farm Ordinance. This ordinance helps protect farming operations from interruptions due to land use conflicts with adjacent properties. The intent of the ordinance is to allow farmers to conduct normal farming operations (harvest crops, till soil, or spray crops) without interference from nearby land owners. In essence, it allows farmers to conduct their operations as needed.

PLAN ELEMENTS

The Draft General Plan would allow new urban development (residential, industrial, or commercial land uses) on approximately 37,737 acres of land. New development would most likely occur near or adjacent to existing urban areas (e.g. within Sphere of Influence areas). If this occurs, it would result in a loss of approximately 7.3 percent of the County's prime/important agricultural soil. Agricultural output would decrease due to removal of farmland from crop production. Agricultural market revenues would also decrease due to reduced farm production. Farming operations adjacent to urban land uses may be impacted from urban land use conflicts. Agricultural preserves may decrease as urban land uses move into agricultural areas.

The Draft General Plan contains the following policies to support the goal of long-term preservation and protection of agricultural resources.

Agriculture

- Policy LU-A.1 The County shall maintain agriculturally-designated areas for agriculture use and shall direct urban growth away from valuable agricultural lands to cities, unincorporated communities, and other areas planned for such development where public facilities and infrastructure are available.
- Policy LU-A.2 The County shall allow by right in areas designated Agriculture activities related to the production of food and fiber and support uses incidental and secondary to the on-site agricultural operation. Uses listed in Table LU-3 are illustrative of the range of uses allowed in areas designated Agriculture.
- Policy LU-A.3 The County may allow by discretionary permit in areas designated Agriculture, special agricultural uses and agriculturally-related activities, including value-added processing facilities, and certain non-agricultural uses listed in Table LU-3. Approval of these and similar uses in areas designated Agriculture shall be subject to the following criteria:
- a. The use shall provide a needed service to the surrounding agricultural area which cannot be provided more efficiently within urban areas or which requires location in a non-urban area because of unusual site requirements or operational characteristics;
 - b. The use should not be sited on productive agricultural lands if less productive land is available in the vicinity;
 - c. The operational or physical characteristics of the use shall not have a detrimental impact on water resources or the use or management of surrounding properties within at least one-quarter (1/4) mile radius;
 - d. A probable workforce should be located nearby or be readily available;
 - e. For proposed agricultural commercial center uses the following additional criteria shall apply:
 1. Commercial uses should be clustered in centers instead of single uses.
 2. To minimize proliferation of commercial centers and overlapping of trade areas, commercial centers should be located a minimum of four (4) miles from any existing or approved agricultural or rural residential commercial center or designated commercial area of any city or unincorporated community.
 3. New commercial uses should be located within or adjacent to existing centers.
 4. Sites should be located on a major road serving the surrounding area.
 5. Commercial centers should not encompass more than one-quarter (1/4) mile of road frontage, or one-eighth (1/8) mile if both sides of the road are involved, and should not provide potential for developments exceeding ten (10) separate business activities, exclusive of caretakers' residences;
 - f. For proposed value-added agricultural processing facilities, the evaluation under criteria "a" above, shall consider the service requirements of the use and the capability and capacity of cities and unincorporated communities to provide the required services; and
 - g. For proposed churches and schools, the evaluation under criteria LU-A.3a above shall include consideration of the size of the facility. Such facilities should be no larger than needed to serve the surrounding agricultural community.
 - h. When approving a discretionary permit for an existing commercial use, the criteria listed above shall apply except for LU-A.3b, e2, e4, and e5.

TABLE LU-3 TYPICAL USES ALLOWED IN AREAS DESIGNATED AGRICULTURE (Policies LU-A.2 and LU-A.3)			
BY RIGHT	SPECIAL PERMIT USES		
Agricultural Uses	Special Agricultural Uses	Agriculturally-Related & Value-Added Agricultural Uses	Agricultural Commercial Center Uses & Other Non-Agricultural Uses
<p>Crop & livestock production, except as specified under special permit uses</p> <p>Packing, processing & sale of crops produced on premises, or where such activity is carried on in conjunction with or as part of a bonafide agricultural operation under the same ownership, except as specified under special permit uses</p> <p>Sale of livestock produced or raised on the premises</p> <p>Residences</p> <p>Home occupations</p> <p>Certain oil & gas development activities pursuant to the policies in Section OS-C, Mineral Resources, of the Open Space and Conservation Element</p>	<p>Cattle feed lots</p> <p>Dairies</p> <p>Goat lots</p> <p>Swine yards</p> <p>Poultry operations</p> <p>Fish farms</p>	<p>Wineries & distilleries</p> <p>Cotton ginning</p> <p>Cottonseed delinting</p> <p>Tree nut hulling & shelling</p> <p>Trucking operations servicing the agricultural community</p> <p>Inspection & weighing services associated with transportation of agricultural products</p> <p>Commercial land leveling & developing establishments</p> <p>Farm labor camps</p> <p>Commercial grain elevators</p> <p>Dehydration operations</p> <p>Commercial soil preparation service establishments</p> <p>Commercial packing & processing of crops</p> <p>Commercial meat processing plants</p>	<p><u>Commercial Centers:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veterinary Services & hospitals • Medical & health services • Irrigation systems administration offices • Water-well drilling services • Farm equipment & machinery sales, rental, storage & maintenance • Welding & blacksmith shops • Agricultural employment services • Feed & farm supply sales • Fertilizer sales • Building materials sales • Hardware stores • Grocery stores • Gasoline service stations • Liquefied petroleum gas distribution & storage • Livestock auction market <p><u>Other:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organic & inorganic fertilizer manufacturing & mixing • Boarding & training kennels • Home occupations • Sewage treatment plants • Solid waste disposal • Race tracks • Pistol & rifle range • Churches • Schools • Cemeteries • Commercial stables & riding academies • Golf courses • Radio & television broadcasting stations • Wireless communication facilities • Electrical substations • Liquefied petroleum gas distribution & storage • Airports • Detention facilities • Interstate freeway commercial development • Mineral extraction and oil and gas development pursuant to the policies in Section OS-C, Mineral Resources, of the Open Space and Conservation Element.

- Policy LU-A.4 The County shall require that the recovery of mineral resources and the exploration and extraction of oil and natural gas in areas designated Agriculture comply with the Mineral Resources Section of the Open Space and Conservation Element. (See Section OS-G)
- Policy LU-A.5 The County shall allow the Agricultural Commercial (AC) center zone district to remain in areas designated Agriculture if the land was so zoned prior to September 20, 1990. Commercial uses legally established prior to that date shall be deemed conforming, but expansion or the addition of new commercial uses shall require a discretionary permit as provided in Policy LU-A.3.
- Policy LU-A.6 The County shall maintain twenty (20) acres as the minimum permitted parcel size in areas designated Agriculture, except as provided in Policies LU-A.9, LU-A.10, and LU-A.11. The County may require parcel sizes larger than twenty (20) acres based on zoning, local agricultural conditions, and to help ensure the viability of agricultural operations.
- Policy LU-A.7 The County shall generally deny requests to create parcels less than the minimum size specified in Policy LU-A.6 based on concerns that these parcels are less viable economic farming units, and that the resultant increase in residential density increases the potential for conflict with normal agricultural practices on adjacent parcels. Evidence that the affected parcel may be an uneconomic farming unit due to its current size, soil conditions, or other factors shall not alone be considered a sufficient basis to grant an exception. The decision-making body shall consider the negative incremental and cumulative effects such land divisions have on the agricultural community.
- Policy LU-A.8 The County shall allow by right on each parcel designated Agriculture and zoned for agricultural use one (1) single family residential unit. One (1) additional single family residential unit shall be allowed for each twenty (20) acres in excess of twenty (20) acres where the minimum parcel size is twenty (20) acres. One (1) additional single family residential unit shall be allowed for each forty (40) acres in excess of forty (40) acres where the required minimum parcel size is forty (40) acres. The County may, by discretionary permit, allow a second unit on parcels otherwise limited by this policy to a single unit.
- Policy LU-A.9 The County may allow creation of homesite parcels smaller than the minimum parcel size required by Policy LU-A.6, if the parcel involved in the division is at least twenty (20) acres in size, subject to the following criteria:
- a. The minimum lot size shall be sixty thousand (60,000) square feet of gross area, except that a lesser area shall be permitted when the owner submits evidence satisfactory to the Health Officer that the soils meet the Water Quality Control Board Guidelines for liquid waste disposal, but in no event shall the lot be less than one (1) gross acre; and
 - b. One of the following conditions exists:
 1. A lot less than twenty (20) acres is required for financing construction of a residence to be owned and occupied by the owner of abutting property; or
 2. The lot or lots to be created are intended for use by persons involved in the farming operation and related to the owner by adoption, blood, or marriage within the second degree of consanguinity, there is only one (1) lot per related person, and there is no more than one (1) gift lot per parcel of twenty (20) acres or more; or
 3. The present owner owned the property prior to the date these policies were implemented and wishes to retain his/her homesite and sell the remaining acreage for agricultural purposes.

Each homesite created pursuant to this policy shall reduce by one (1) the number of residential units otherwise authorized on the remainder parcel created from the original parcel.

- Policy LU-A.10 The County may allow by discretionary permit creation of substandard lots when necessary for the development of an agricultural commercial center pursuant to Policy LU-A.3 or in conjunction with development within a designated commercial interchange within the Westside Freeway Corridor Overlay. Approval of such parcels shall take into consideration the proposed use of the property, surrounding uses, and the potential for abandonment of the planned commercial use at a future date. Appropriate conditions shall be applied to minimize adverse impacts on surrounding agricultural operations. Parcels for agricultural commercial centers shall in no case be less than one (1) gross acre.
- Policy LU-A.11 The County may allow by discretionary permit creation of substandard size lots when such action is deemed necessary by the Board of Supervisors for the recovery of mineral resources and the exploration and extraction of oil and gas in accordance with the policies of Section OS-C, Mineral Resources, of the Open Space and Conservation Element. In no case shall such action result in creation of lots less than five (5) gross acres in size.
- Policy LU-A.12 In adopting land uses policies, regulations and programs, the County shall seek to protect agricultural activities from encroachment of incompatible land uses.
- Policy LU-A.13 The County shall minimize potential land use conflicts between agricultural activities and urban land uses through the provision of appropriate buffers or other measures.
- Policy LU-A.14 The County shall generally condition discretionary permits for residential development within or adjacent to agricultural areas upon the recording of a Right-to-Farm Notice, which is an acknowledgment that residents in the area should be prepared to accept the inconveniences and discomfort associated with normal farming activities and that an established agricultural operation shall not be considered a nuisance due to changes in the surrounding area.
- Policy LU-A.15 The County should consider the use of agricultural land preservation programs that improve the competitive capabilities of farms and ranches, thereby ensuring long-term conservation of viable agricultural operations. Examples of programs to be considered should include: land trusts; conservation easements; dedication incentives; new and continued Williamson Act contracts; Farmland Security Zone Act contracts; the Agricultural Land Stewardship Program Fund; agricultural education programs; zoning regulations; agricultural mitigation fee program; urban growth boundaries; transfer of development rights; purchase of development rights; and agricultural buffer policies.
- Policy LU-A.16 The County shall accept California Land Conservation contracts on all designated agricultural land subject to the acreage and use limitations established by the County.
- Policy LU-A.17 The County shall encourage land improvement programs to increase soil productivity in areas containing lesser quality agricultural soils.
- Policy LU-A.18 The County shall encourage landowners to participate in programs that reduce soil erosion and increase soil productivity. To this end, the County shall promote coordination between the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Resource Conservation Districts, UC Cooperative Extension, and other agencies and organizations.
- Policy LU-A.19 The County shall adopt and support policies and programs that seek to protect and enhance surface water and groundwater resources critical to agriculture. (See Section OS-A, Water Resources; and Section PF-C, Water Supply and Delivery)
- Policy LU-A.20 The County shall support and participate in on-going public education programs by organizations such as the County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, UC Cooperative Extension, Farm Bureau, and industry organizations to help the public better understand the importance of the agricultural industry.

Rangeland

- Policy LU-B.2 The County shall allow by right in areas designated Westside Rangeland grazing and other agricultural activities related to the production of food and fiber and support uses incidental and secondary to the onsite agricultural operations. Uses listed in Table LU-4 are illustrative of the range of uses allowed in areas designated Westside Rangeland. Other uses consistent with the intent of the grazing policies may be permitted by amendment of the Zoning Ordinance.
- Policy LU-B.3 The County may allow by discretionary permit in areas designated Westside Rangeland special agricultural uses and agriculturally-related activities, and certain non-agricultural uses listed in Table LU-4. Approval of these or similar uses in areas designated Westside Rangeland shall be subject to the following criteria:
- a. The use shall provide a needed service to the surrounding agricultural area which cannot be provided more efficiently within urban areas or requires location in a non-urban area because of unusual site requirements or operational characteristics.
 - b. The use should not be sited on productive agricultural lands if less productive land is available in the vicinity.
 - c. The operational or physical characteristics of the use shall not have a detrimental impact on water resources or the use or management of surrounding properties within at least one quarter (1/4) mile radius.
 - d. A probable workforce should be located nearby or be readily available.
 - e. For proposed commercial uses the following additional criteria shall apply:
 1. Commercial uses should be clustered in centers instead of single uses.
 2. To minimize proliferation of commercial centers and overlapping of trade areas, commercial centers should be located a minimum of four (4) miles from any existing or approved agricultural or rural residential commercial center or designated commercial area of any city or unincorporated community.
 3. New commercial uses should be located within or adjacent to existing centers.
 4. Sites should be located on a major road serving the surrounding area.
 5. Commercial centers should not encompass more than one quarter (1/4) mile of road frontage, or one eighth (1/8) mile if both sides of the road are involved, and should not provide potential for developments exceeding ten (10) separate business activities, exclusive of caretakers' residences.
 - f. For proposed churches and schools, the evaluation under criteria LU-B.3a above shall include consideration of the size of the facility. Such facilities should be no larger than needed to serve the surrounding agricultural community.
 - g. When approving a discretionary permit for an existing use, the criteria listed above shall apply except for LU-B.3b, e2, e4, and e5.
- Policy LU-B.5 The County shall maintain forty (40) acres as the minimum permitted parcel size in areas designated Westside Rangeland, except as provided in Policies LU-B.7, LU-B.9, and LU-B.10. The County may require parcel sizes larger than forty (40) acres based on zoning, local conditions, and to help ensure the viability of grazing and agricultural operations.
- Policy LU-B.7 The County may allow creation of homesites smaller than the minimum parcel size required by Policy LU-B.5 in areas designated Westside Rangeland if the parcel involved in the division is at least forty (4) acres in size and subject to the following criteria:
- a. The minimum lot size shall be sixty thousand (60,000) square feet of gross area, except that a lesser area shall be permitted when the owner submits evidence satisfactory to the Health Officer that the soils meet the Water Quality Control Board Guidelines for liquid waste disposal, but in no event shall the lot be less than one (1) gross acre, and

TABLE LU-4 TYPICAL USES ALLOWED IN AREAS DESIGNATED WESTSIDE RANGELAND (Policies LU-B.2 and LU-B.3)				
BY RIGHT	SPECIAL PERMIT USES			
	Special Agricultural Uses	Agriculturally-Related & Non-Agricultural Uses		Agricultural Commercial Centers
Crop & livestock production except as specified under Special Permitted Uses Packing, processing, & sale of crops produced on the premises, or where such activity is carried on in conjunction with, or as part of a bonafide agricultural operation under the same ownership except as specified under Special Permitted Uses Sale of livestock produced or raised on the premises Residences Home occupations Non-intensive recreation such as hiking, rockhounding, and hunting Certain oil and gas activity pursuant to policies in Section OS-C, Mineral Resources, of the Open Space and Conservation Element	Cattle feed lots Sheep lots Goat lots Swine lots Poultry operations Mushroom growing	Trucking operations servicing the agricultural community Inspection & weighing services associates with transportation of agricultural products Boarding & training kennels Commercial meat processing plants Commercial packing & processing of crops Specialty animal raising Feed & farm supply sales Veterinarian offices Public buildings & yards, fire stations Churches	Flood control Sewage treatment plants Solid waste disposal Schools Cemeteries Commercial stables & riding academies Radio & television broadcasting stations Wireless communication facilities Substations Liquified petroleum gas distribution & storage Airports Detention facilities Intensive recreation such as golf courses, dude ranches, off-road vehicle parks, recreational vehicle camp sites, & campgrounds Mineral extraction and oil and gas development pursuant to policies in Section OS-C, Mineral Resources of the Open Space and Conservation Element	Veterinary services & hospitals Medical & health services Public bldgs. and yards, fire stations Irrigation systems, administration offices Water-well drilling service Farm equipment & machinery sales, rental, storage, & maintenance Welding & blacksmith shops Agricultural employment services Farm labor contractor service Feed & farm supply sales Fertilizer sales Bldg. materials sales Hardware stores Misc. general merchandise stores Grocery stores Gasoline service station Liquified petroleum gas distribution & storage Livestock auction markets Eating & drinking establishments Beauty & barber shops Caretaker's residence Churches Trucking operations servicing the agricultural community

- b. One of the following conditions exists:
 - 1. A lot less than forty (40) acres is required for financing construction of a residence to be owned and occupied by the owner of abutting property, or
 - 2. The lot or lots to be created are intended for use by persons involved in the farming or ranching operations and related to the owner by adoption, blood, or marriage within the second degree of consanguinity, there is only one (1) lot per related person, and there is no more than one (1) gift lot per each forty (40) acres, or
 - 3. The present owner owned the property prior to the date that these policies were implemented by adoption of the exclusive agriculture zone district and wishes to retain his homesite and sell the remaining acreage for grazing or other agricultural purposes.

Each homesite created pursuant to this policy shall reduce by one (1) the number of residential units otherwise authorized on the remainder parcel created from the original parcel.

Policy LU-B.9 The County may allow by discretionary permit creation of substandard lots when necessary for the development of an agricultural commercial center pursuant to Policy LU-B.3 or in conjunction with development within a designated commercial interchange within the Westside Freeway overlay. Approval of such parcels shall take into consideration the proposed use of the property, surrounding uses, and the potential for abandonment of the planned commercial use at a future date. Appropriate conditions shall be applied to minimize adverse impacts on surrounding agricultural operations. Parcels for agricultural commercial centers shall in no case be less than one (1) gross acre.

Policy LU-B.10 The County may allow by discretionary permit creation of substandard size lots when such is deemed necessary by the Board of Supervisors for the recovery of mineral resources and the exploration of oil and gas in accordance with the policies in Section OS-C, Mineral Resources, of the Open Space and Conservation Element. In no case shall such action result in creation of lots less than five (5) gross acres in size.

Policy LU-B.14 The County shall accept California Land Conservation contracts on all land designated Westside Rangeland subject to the acreage and use limitations established by the County.

IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Method of Analysis

Land acreage data provided for the different economic and growth scenarios, analyzed as part of the general plan update process, were tabulated to project the amount of land that will be needed to accommodate the population growth anticipated in the proposed land use plan. Land available within existing sphere's of influence (SOIs) for each incorporated city and for urban areas in the unincorporated areas of the county were also tabulated. Land demand under the growth alternatives (growth rates) was compared to the amount of land available within the SOIs to determine the amount of land that will be needed within and outside the existing SOIs and unincorporated urban areas for the different alternatives.

Land within the SOIs generally have prime soils, and are currently used for agriculture. The amount and location of farmland that will be converted to urban uses and its soil types were calculated, and implications to agricultural resource loss were determined.

Potential crop loss estimates were determined based on soil characteristics. Soil and drainage conditions, slope, and water availability affect the ability to grow certain crop types and their productivity. These and other factors (as discussed in the *Background Report, Chapter 2*) define soil categories.

Generalizations on the potential to grow a range of crop types were determined based on general soil conditions. However, it should be noted that specific soil characteristics such as mineral content, alkalinity, and the presence of cobbles affects the types of crops that can be grown and their potential yield. For instance, soil depth, drainage, and water supply will be factors in determining whether land should be planted with permanent crops such as tree fruit or grape vines. In addition, although land may contain prime soil, subtle nuances in soil characteristics will lend themselves better to growing certain types of fruit crops over others. However, it was assumed that prime soils can support a wide variety of crop types including permanent crops, vegetable crops, etc. Soils with less quality and less reliable water supply also cannot support certain crops. They may be able to grow the same crops, but may not yield as much as other areas. Generally, farmers will plant crops that will produce the highest market value and crop yields that cost the least to grow and maintain. Financial impacts from crop loss due to the conversion of agricultural land was determined by calculating the value of crops that can be produced per acre by the presence of soil types in the locations that will be converted to urban land uses under the Draft General Plan.

Implications to the status of agricultural preserves, specifically lands under Williamson Act contracts, were assessed based on the location of the land under contract and whether the lands are within an existing SOI or on land just outside it, and whether it would likely be subject to pressure to convert to urban land uses.

Standards of Significance

For the purposes of this EIR, a significant environmental impact would occur if the Proposed Project would:

- convert prime agricultural land to non-agricultural land uses;
- significantly decrease the amount of agricultural production due to land being taken out of agricultural use that would impact the amount of food and fiber available to consumers; or
- significantly increase the number of land conservation contract non-renewals and cancellations (Williamson Act contracts) or encourage conversion of farmland to urban land uses.

Impacts and Mitigation Measures

4.3-1 Development under the Draft General Plan would result in the permanent loss of important farmland.

The Proposed Project is a combination of Economic Scenarios B/C (Shifts in Agricultural Production/Value Added Agriculture) and D (Non-Agricultural Basic Employment), which were developed as part of the General Plan update process. The Proposed Project assumes an increase in the area of land currently occupied by urban land uses to accommodate new growth and development to the year 2020. Although there are variances in the amount of land projected to be needed between scenarios B/C and D for different regions of the County (some areas will require less land than planned for, while others will require more), the total amount of land that would be needed is 37,737 acres. This represents approximately 1.02 percent of land in the County, excluding cities.

Currently, there are 50,688 acres (combined) within the existing spheres of influence and community plan areas that are available to absorb urban development within the foreseeable future. With the exception of the City of Fresno (see Table 2-2 in Chapter 2, Project Description and Demographic Information), there is enough land within the existing SOIs to accommodate projected growth under the Proposed Project. Most new development would occur on vacant, agricultural land located within or adjacent to SOIs, while some new development would either occur on land outside of SOIs/planned areas or within city boundaries as infill.

Almost all of the cities and urbanized areas in Fresno County are surrounded by prime farmland and/or farmland of statewide importance, both inside and outside their SOIs and around the unincorporated community plan areas. Under the Proposed Project, it is conservatively assumed the total 37,737 acres (7.3 percent) of the County's prime and/or important soil would be converted to urban uses, based on the 1997 State Department of Conservation Farmland Mapping program. Such loss of farmland would also occur without the Proposed Project. Although 4,129 acres less land would be converted to urban uses than that which would occur under the Proposed Project, the 33,608 acres that would be converted would still result in the permanent loss of prime and/or important farmland without the project. The potential loss of up to 37,373 acres of prime and/or important farmland as a result of the Proposed Project would be a significant environmental impact. Region-specific effects are summarized below.

Most farmland impacts would occur in the Eastside Valley region because that is the location of the County's most valuable soils, largest cities, and areas with the most potential for new growth. As noted above, all of the cities in the Eastside Valley can accommodate projected growth with less land than currently allocated in their SOIs, with the exception of Fresno. The City of Fresno would require approximately 1,971 acres outside its SOI. Areas surrounding the cities within the SOIs and areas adjacent to the SOIs are generally all prime or important farmland. A total of approximately 36,019 acres of prime or important farmland could be converted to urban uses in the Eastside Valley area.

The Proposed Project would affect farmland soils in the Westside Valley by converting approximately 1,441 acres of farmland to urbanized land uses. The unincorporated area of this region is projected to require approximately 351 acres of the 1,441 acres, but it is undetermined how this conversion would be distributed.

The Coast Range foothills would experience a loss of approximately 2 acres due to urbanization in the unincorporated area. This area typically does not produce crops, and does not include areas with significant prime or important farmland. Thus, impacts to farmlands in this region from the development under the Proposed Project would be minimal.

The projection of land estimated for the Proposed Project in the Sierra Nevada foothills is 232 acres. Very little of this land is prime or important farmland, so impacts to soil resources would be minimal; however, this land is used for cattle grazing and orchards to some extent.

The Sierra Nevada Mountain region does not have significant soil or agricultural resources, however some portions of the region are used for cattle grazing. The land use projection for this scenario would only convert 43 acres of the 448 acres included in the community planning areas. The Proposed Project would result in far less land conversion than currently planned.

In the past, existing regulations have not been very effective in controlling farmland conversion. Williamson Act contracts and the Right-to-Farm ordinance are among the few tools the County has to assist farmers in maintaining their land in agriculture and being able to make a living in the agricultural industry.

The Draft General Plan policies would help the County clearly define where new development should occur and where agricultural land should be preserved. For example, Policy LU-A.1 states that new development should be located within existing urban areas. Policies LU-A.12 and LU-A.13 protects agricultural activities from encroachment of incompatible land uses. Policy LU-A.14 enables the county to condition permits for residential development adjacent to agricultural areas by recording a Right-to-Farm Notice. Policies LU-A.15, LU-A.16, LU-A.20 and LU-B.14 also provide direction for the County to consider establishing several agricultural conservation programs, including setting up criteria to determine which lands should receive priority funding for land conservation easements, establishing an agricultural mitigation fee program to help offset development on agricultural lands, and participation in the Agricultural Land Stewardship Program Fund. Although these policies would reduce the magnitude of this impact within the unincorporated areas, it would not reduce the effect to a less-than-significant level. In addition, most of development (by acreage) would occur within incorporated areas and proximate areas within cities' spheres of influence, where the County cannot ensure implementation of similar measures to minimize identified significant impacts. Therefore, the potential loss of farmland is considered a **significant impact**.

Mitigation Measures

- 4.3-1 *None available beyond Draft General Plan Policies LU-A.1 through LU-A.20, and LU-B.1 through LU-B.14 for Fresno County. No mitigation measures are available to the County to reduce impacts occurring within the cities' jurisdiction.*

Effective implementation of the policies cited above would reduce the magnitude of loss of farmland due to development that occurs within the County's jurisdiction, but not to a less-than-significant level.

Similar measures are available to, and required by some of the cities in the county. However, the County cannot ensure that similar measures would be enforced for development (whether related to the Proposed Project or not) that occurs within other jurisdictions. Therefore, the impact would remain significant and unavoidable.

4.3-2 Development under the Draft General Plan would result in a significant reduction in agricultural production.

Development under the Draft General Plan could result in the loss of 37,737 acres of land currently producing food and fiber. Although farming techniques have improved and in some cases intensified, resulting in greater productive capabilities (gross yields per acre) than a decade ago, farmland conversion will result in crop losses. As previously stated, farmland conversion will likely occur near existing urban areas. These areas are also the location of the County's most productive and high value farmlands. These areas typically have prime and/or important farmland, and are planted with permanent crops such as tree fruit or nuts, vineyards, or specialty crops such as strawberries, lettuces, etc. Thus, there will also be financial impacts due to crop loss as well as a loss to consumers. The cost of products produced on remaining land will potentially increase since land available to grow them will decrease. This will perhaps be passed on to consumers.

If 37,737 acres of farmland are converted to urban uses, within existing SOIs and/or nearby areas, the production of tree fruit or nuts, vineyards, specialty crops, vegetables and other crops would be reduced. Since the exact location of parcels that would be converted is not known, the exact location of particular crops that will be lost cannot be precisely determined. However, the range of financial impacts can be calculated based on the type of farmland projected to be converted. As noted in the publication, *A Landscape of Choice*, farmland crops in Fresno County can range in value between \$6,000 per acre and \$15,000 per acre. (The value of crops per acre is larger due to the multiplier effect of crop production on the agricultural economy.) Thus, impacts from conversion of 37,737 acres of land and loss of crop production could result in losses of between \$226,422,000 and \$566,055,000. It should be noted that the conversion of acres to developed uses would occur with or without the Proposed Project. Without the project, losses would range from \$201,648,000 to \$504,120,000, assuming conversion of 33,608 acres.

As previously stated, most farmland conversion will likely occur near existing urban areas. These areas are also the location of the County's most productive and high value farmlands. These areas typically have prime and/or important farmland, and are planted with permanent crops such as tree fruit or nuts, vineyards, or specialty crops such as strawberries and lettuce. Thus, there would also be financial impacts due to crop loss as well as a loss to consumers. The cost of products produced on remaining land would potentially increase since land available to grow them will decrease. This cost could be passed on to consumers.

The Draft General Plan includes policies to address the reduction in farmland productivity. Policy LU-A.18 encourages land improvement programs to increase soil productivity in areas containing low quality soils. Policies LU-A.18 through LU-A.20 encourage landowners to participate in programs designed to understand soil and water issues and promote educational programs to better understand the importance of the agricultural industry. Policies LU-A.6, LU-A.7, LU-A.10, LU-A.11, and LU-B.5 through LU-B.7 address minimum parcel sizes for agricultural and rangeland activities. These policies would ensure reduce the magnitude of the loss of agricultural production, but not to less-than-significant levels. In addition, most of development (by acreage) would occur within incorporated areas and proximate areas within cities' spheres of influence, where the County cannot ensure implementation of similar measures to minimize identified significant impacts. Therefore, the potential loss in agricultural production is considered a **significant impact**.

Mitigation Measures

- 4.3-2 *None available beyond Draft General Plan Policies LU-A.6, LU-A.7, LU-A.10, LU-A.11, LU-A.18 through LU-A.20, and LU-B.5 through LU-B.7 for Fresno County. No mitigation measures are available to the County to reduce impacts occurring within the cities' jurisdiction.*

Effective implementation of the policies cited above would reduce the magnitude of loss of farmland productivity that occurs within the County's jurisdiction, but not to a less-than-significant level. Similar measures are available to, and required by some of the cities in the county. However, the County cannot ensure that similar measures would be enforced for development (whether related to the Proposed Project or not) that occurs within other jurisdictions. Therefore, the impact would remain significant and unavoidable.

4.3-3 Development under the Draft General Plan would result in increased non-renewal and cancellation of Williamson Act Contracts.

One of the primary tools used to preserve agricultural lands is the California Land Conservation Act (LCA) or Williamson Act. The act provides tax incentives to those landowners who voluntarily enter into a long-term contract with cities or counties to maintain their lands as farmlands. Under the contract, lands are prohibited from being converted into urbanized areas for a period of ten years. The contract is automatically renewed each year for 10 years to maintain the 10-year time horizon. To have lands removed from this time horizon, a land owner must file a notice of non-renewal, or request of cancellation. Once a notice of non-renewal has been processed, the land value assessed is incrementally increased to reach market rates at the time the contract on the land expires, 10 years from the time that the notice of non-renewal is filed. As the amount of land within the boundaries of the SOI's decrease, market pressures to file notices of non-renewal upon lands adjacent to these boundaries will increase.

As urban growth continues, and less land within the SOIs are available to be developed, investors will look to land adjacent to the SOI boundaries. By 2020, it is estimated that approximately 13,500 acres of land that is located within SOIs and that is subject to existing LCA contracts will likely be taken out of preserve to accommodate urban growth, which would result in conversion of farmland and crop production loss. It should be noted that most projected development would occur with or without the Proposed Project, as would the pressure to cancel Williamson Act contracts.

The Draft General Plan includes policies LU-A.15, LU-A.16, and LU-B.14, which encourage the use of agricultural preservation programs (i.e., Williamson Act) to ensure long-term conservation of viable agricultural operations. These policies would reduce the magnitude of impacts associated with cancellation of Williamson Act Contracts, but not to a less-than-significant level for lands within County jurisdiction. Further, the County cannot ensure that similar measures would be enforced for development (whether related to the Proposed Project or not) that occurs within other jurisdictions. Therefore, the impact is considered **significant**.

Mitigation Measure

- 4.3-3 *None available beyond Draft General Plan Policies LU-A.15, LU-A.16, and LU-B.14 for Fresno County. No mitigation measures are available to the County to reduce impacts occurring within the cities' jurisdiction.*

Effective implementation of the policies cited above would reduce the magnitude of effects associated with cancellation of Williamson Act Contracts that would occur within the County's jurisdiction, but not to a less-than-significant level. Similar measures are available to, and required by some of the cities in the county. However, the County cannot ensure that similar measures would be enforced for development (whether related to the Proposed Project or not) that occurs within other jurisdictions. Therefore, the impact would remain significant and unavoidable.

Cumulative Impacts

The cumulative context for agricultural resources is development on agriculturally-designated areas or used for active agricultural production or grazing within the Central Valley through the year 2020. These designations and activities occur throughout the Central Valley, particularly in the San Joaquin Valley flatland areas for crop production and in foothill areas for cattle grazing.

4.3-4 Development within Fresno County, in conjunction with other development within the San Joaquin Valley, could result in the permanent loss of important farmland, a significant reduction in agricultural production, and an increase in the non-renewal and cancellation of Williamson Act Contracts.

The Proposed Project by itself (i.e., the growth attributable directly to the Draft General Plan policies plus the increment attributable to the Economic Development Strategy) represents a relatively small portion of the growth projected to occur in the county by 2020, and an even smaller portion of growth anticipated within the San Joaquin Valley during the planning horizon. However, some of this growth is expected to occur in areas in which agriculturally-designated areas exist.

This cumulative impact on agricultural lands will occur incrementally as individual development projects are entitled and built, most in conformance with and not requiring amendment to the County General Plan or other jurisdiction long-range land use plans. In aggregate, these projects could result in the loss of land designated for agricultural purposes or used for active agricultural production or grazing.

As discussed above, the project would contribute considerably to these impacts within Fresno County.

Furthermore, development in Fresno County, including the project increment, would contribute to the significant loss of agricultural resources elsewhere in the San Joaquin Valley, and in the Coast Range and Sierra Nevada foothills and the Sierra Nevada to a lesser degree.

The policies aimed at preserving and protecting agricultural resources will minimize the cumulative impact from the Project within Fresno County's jurisdiction. Similar policies in adjacent counties and mandated by the State and other cities and counties could minimize the impacts within the San Joaquin Valley (and Central Valley). However, implementation of such policies are beyond the control of the County. Therefore, the cumulative impacts to agriculture are considered **significant**.

Mitigation Measures

4.3-4 *None available beyond Draft General Plan Policies LU-A.1 through LU-A.20 and LU-B.1 through LU-B.14.*

Implementation of the Draft General Policies listed above would reduce the project's contribution to this significant cumulative impact, but not to less-than-significant levels, and such measures would not reduce the cumulative effect to less-than-significant levels. Therefore, the cumulative impact would remain significant and unavoidable.